

Edwards: Veterans Day Is A Sacred Day

A Column By Congressman Chet Edwards

Veterans Day should not be just another shopping day or holiday. November 11th should be a sacred day when all Americans take time to thank, salute and pray for our nation's veterans.

At least once a year, my wife and I take our two young sons to Walter Reed Army Medical Center to thank our wounded troops who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. We want J.T. and Garrison to understand the sacrifices that have been made to protect our nation and their future.

We will never forget the 25-year-old soldier we met there last summer. He had lost both of his legs in combat in Iraq and was in a wheelchair holding his two-year-old son lovingly in his arms. As I stood there holding my sons' hands in mine, I could not help but be overwhelmed by the sacrifice this young father had made in service to country, and that he would continue to sacrifice every day for the rest of his life. Amidst the emotions of the moment, I could not help but think that while we could never give this loving father his legs back, he should never ever have to give up on the dreams he has for his son. When I think about the moral obligation we have to support our veterans, I will think about that soldier and his son.

Supporting our veterans means respecting them with our actions, not just our words. That is why it was such a humbling privilege for me to Chair the House Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Committee over the last two years.

In these two years we increased funding for veterans' health care and benefits by \$16.3 billion. That was \$9 billion more than what the President requested and a larger increase in two years than the previous 12 years combined in Congress. In fact, we increased veterans' health care funding by more than any Congress in the history of the Veterans Administration. Our veterans earned and deserved every dime. Here is what that new commitment to our veterans means:

- The VA will hire over 2,000 new doctors and over 6,500 new nurses.
- We have nearly doubled funding for mental health care, and will provide a minimum of \$3.8 billion for fiscal year 2009.
- We provided funding for 5,100 additional disability claims processors to begin addressing the 400,000 claim backlog and to get veterans their earned benefits more quickly. Present delay times are unconscionable, and we are doing something about it.
- To prevent a Walter Reed Annex 18 tragedy from occurring in the VA system, we have increased non-recurring maintenance for VA hospitals by 240%.

- For the first time since 2003, we are re-opening up our VA hospitals to more middle income veterans who desperately need health care, but whose injuries are not service-connected.
- For veterans in rural and mid-size cities without veterans hospitals, we have funded 115 new VA community clinics.
- For many of those who still have to drive long distances to VA hospitals, for the first time since 1979, when gasoline prices were 95 cents per gallon, we have increased the mileage reimbursement rate from 11 cents to 41.5 cents per mile. For many veterans it is the difference between them even being able to afford to drive to get the care they need and deserve.
- We are modernizing our 4 existing polytrauma centers that provide care for the most seriously wounded veterans and will build the first ever polytrauma center in the entire southwestern United States.
- For homeless veterans, we doubled the housing per diem budget, and on that front, we have only just begun.
- The new Congress has twice turned down the Bush Administration's ill advised proposals to increase military retirees' TRICARE health premiums by \$1000 a year, nearly double veterans' prescription drug co-pays from \$8 to \$15 and require veterans to pay a new enrollment fee for VA care. As I see it, veterans paid their VA enrollment fee when they put on our nation's uniform.

Our veterans don't ask for much, but our nation owes them more than we can ever repay. By these actions, the American people, through its elected representatives, have done what they can to demonstrate their appreciation for those who have served in uniform not only on Veterans Day, but on every day of the year.

Edwards is the Chairman of the House Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee.